

Under No Circumstances Resolve the Main Problem

Higher Education Policy Overview in Australia

Tom Clark

The perpetual restructuring of the higher education sector has become an industry in itself. Tom Clark argues that the only way forward is a new - and as yet unrealised - policy consensus.

If you were to design a future for higher education in Australia, say a 30-year plan to carry the sector through to the next generation, what would it look like? The years since 1996 have seen versions of that problem assayed remarkably often at the level of national politics. Comprehensive higher education plans in this period have included the 1997–1998 West review (*Learning for Life*), minister David Kemp's leaked submission to federal cabinet in 1999 (*Proposals for reform in higher education*) combined with his 1999 research policy statement (*Knowledge and Innovation*), the 2001 federal senate inquiry (*Universities in Crisis*), minister Brendan Nelson's 2002–2003 *Crossroads* review of higher education (culminating in the *Backing Australia's Future* package of reforms), and the 2002–2003 ALP policy statements on research (Kim Carr, *Research: Engine Room*) and on tertiary education (Simon Crean and Jenny Macklin, *Aim Higher*). Additionally, two states have conducted reviews of university governance, displaying concerns similar to those of the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training, and Youth Affairs.¹ Moreover, as most efforts to solve the problem have taken the form of open consultative processes, thousands of submissions and responses from hundreds of perspectives have been developed, lodged, and promoted in the course of arriving at these 'higher education policy overviews'. December 2003 seems to mark the conclusion of the latest overview process, but the next one may not be far off. This article attempts a critique of the higher education policy overview, with a particular view to how policy is made through that process.²

The higher education sector in Australia has become reliant for the answers to its most important policy questions on a

process that has not delivered adequate answers, and which becomes less likely to deliver them with each successive iteration. Continually activating that process without addressing the reasons for its failure becomes an exercise in bad faith. That is to say, it becomes a wasteful and often a cynically motivated process. My concern here is with the development of a self-sustaining policy overview process or cycle, arbitrary in its relationship to the needs and aspirations of higher

education in Australia. I note the unsustainability of Australia's higher education system as presently configured, and I conclude with a discussion of two interdependent phenomena: a perpetual political cycle and a critically inadequate policy framework.

The problem remains with us largely because the problem remains important to us.

There are at least six grounds for this claim. First, NTEU's national strike last October against Nelson's *Backing Australia's Future* (BAF) package, widely endorsed by student unions, was effective at every public university in Australia.³ Second, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, though widely criticised for the naivety it showed in negotiating the passage of an amended BAF,⁴ has clearly shown the desperation of university managements for short-term growth in cash flows. Third, the federal caucus of the Australian Labor Party is eager to keep the crisis of higher education finance alive as a political issue (that eagerness has even intensified during the time that the Victorian Socialist Left faction, in the persons of Jenny Macklin and Kim Carr, have occupied both the relevant portfolio positions in the shadow ministry), as are the Australian Democrats and the Greens. Fourth, state governments, their auditors-general, and ombudsmen are increasingly ready

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to pursue the accountability of universities within their jurisdictions. Fifth, the federal government shows great tenacity in its campaign for user-pays funding mechanisms – despite the absence of any noticeable support from the general public, weakening support from *The Australian*, Alan Gilbert's departure overseas from his influential post at the University of Melbourne, and the intense pressure that *BAF* reforms have placed on undergraduate admissions in this election year. Finally – and perhaps most importantly – the regularity of the process has encouraged stakeholders to invest recurring funds in the standing workforce and infrastructure required to meet the demands of each new stage in the process.

To elaborate on this sixth point, we can by now observe the existence of a 'policy overview microsector' in Australia. Each year, institutions and non-government organisations dedicate greater work time and infrastructure to the political process, knowing there is always a major review of higher education policy on hand to absorb such efforts. The apparent economic viability of this micro-sector, its well-established professional standards, its responsiveness to developments in policy, and the growing political networks that its members enjoy are all structural reasons that encourage the policy overview cycle to persist. Furthermore, an unintended consequence of the microsector's activities has been to sustain the legitimating appearance of the policy overview process as a consultative exercise. Policy overviews look like a habit that will be hard to break.

So we return to the initial question. How do you plan the next generation's higher education system in Australia? Such a question could be used as the launching point into extensive methodological literatures. One remarkable feature of the higher education policy overview in Australia is that we see no evidence 'the future' has received methodical consideration, outside narrow modelling of dollars and of student and staff places. Instead, a typical policy overview approach involves the following steps, not necessarily taken in strict sequence:

1. Sample a wide range of policy comment through a combination of publicly invited submissions and actively cultivated opinion.
2. Pass all sampled policy comment through the ideological filter of a well staffed preview process, involving annotation and other editing techniques designed to ensure no submissions reach the expert reference group without being placed in the context of the prevailing policy doctrine.
3. Pass all previewed policy comment through the pragmatic filter of an expert reference group, which generally provides rationale to reject all sampled policy comment

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contradictory to the prevailing policy doctrine, and weaves together all doctrinally amenable policy comment to form a coherent package of policy recommendations.

4. Pass the recommendations of the expert reference group

through the tactical filter of a further political process, to determine the final character of the policy overview and the attendant public relations campaign.

Noting such an exegetical schema is not original, nor is implementing it. Political satire has outlined the same

basic process many times in many contexts – it is tempting to believe that is where the conductors of the process learn their techniques. Nor is it original to note the inherent shortcomings of such a process. The constant breathlessness and occasional malice of participants cause many policy ideas to be lost – for example, the proposal to replace the 'user pays' Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) with a scheme emphasising 'beneficiary pays' – or ritually slaughtered – as happened to the Barry Jones' *Knowledge Nation* report – before they have received a genuine consideration. The fatigue that accompanies this perpetual reviewing means commentators generate fewer new policy ideas with each iteration of the process, in turn meaning the policy framework is deeper in a rut now than it was before the process that drives it began to churn so rapidly. The failure of the policy overviews to present any engaging and imaginative account of the future of Australia's higher education system, meanwhile, has discouraged imagination from activists and engagement from the grass roots (again, this observation becomes more true as the policy overview process works its contributors harder).

That is not an argument against the public submissions approach to policy drafting. It is more that there is a law of diminishing returns to that approach. Through its overuse of the higher education sector's policy energies, 'Canberra' has

depleted Australia's most promising higher education policy resources: the ideas of university members and others with an interest in the problem. Given that Australia's public debate on higher education remains essentially within parameters developed prior to the West review, one wonders what we have gained from it all. A compelling metaphor is attrition warfare. Note, for example, how the entrenchment of doctrinal positions has grown deeper and the differences between those positions have become more caricatured even as the overview process has purported to stimulate communications between the participants.

The above discussion has highlighted the intrinsic shortcomings of Australia's higher education policy overview approach. It is not hard to find cases where the policy framework has realised the aridity to which the approach predisposes it. Neoliberal commentator Andrew Norton has written at length about the failure of the framework to grasp the sector's 'demand-side' operational requirements in their entirety (he means particularly the quality and flexibility of teaching and learning).⁵ A shortcoming of Norton's argument is that the main evidence he uses to criticise the status quo – unimpressive 'student satisfaction' results for Australia's universities in the Course Experience Questionnaire – is more compelling as a criticism of the free market reforms he proposes. Student satisfaction trends have been least healthy among international students and postgraduate coursework students, representing the most heavily deregulated areas of Australian higher education. Still, many non-government organisations, especially student and trade unions, have raised objections comparable to Norton's (though they have proposed very different policy solutions, and have generally rejected the reforms he urges). 'Supply-side' issues have also been vexed, as most commentators have acknowledged,⁶ with no credible strategies emerging to address increases in workforce casualisation, staff workloads, student/teacher ratios, and the academic age profiles in many traditional disciplines.

One simple conclusion to draw is that the policy process for Australia's higher education system is failing to enable a satisfactory or even a plausible future for that system. While we can see the politics behind the policy overview process are highly stable, the policy framework itself lacks that quality. The latest incarnation is a perfect example. When judged by its nominated criterion of universities' long term sustainability, *BAF* is a failure whose consequences – to the extent that anyone has been able to predict them – will go against the interests of universities.⁷

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Does the cock crow again? How should we design the future for higher education in Australia? Sooner or later, this political stability – or stalemate – shall come to an end. That will be the end of an epoch in the history of Australian higher education policy which has been characterised by this stalemate. The breakthrough shall necessarily involve consensus, one way or the other: either a widely shared understanding of the national higher education system's need for a sustainable and educationally adequate policy framework – which has been an (unconvincingly asserted) aim of all the policy over-

views since 1996 – or a shared recognition that the opportunities for constructing a sustainably adequate national higher education system have been used up. Given the above discussion, it seems unlikely that a future policy overview will be able to serve as the catalyst for such a transformation. ***a***

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Endnotes

1 The MCEETYA National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes were introduced in 2000, largely in response to the federal government's earlier decision to accredit Greenwich University as a higher education provider. Greenwich University subsequently lost its accreditation. In 1997 the then Liberal Victorian government used the 1995 Hoare Review as a justification for its own sweeping changes to all Victorian university acts (the Haddon 'Storey reforms'); the ALP Victorian Government in 2003 altered those acts again in a somewhat less radical fashion (Stuart Hamilton, *Review of University Governance*). The NSW Government completed its own review of university governance and introduced changes to all NSW university acts – the Universities Legislation Amendment (Financial and Other Powers) Bill 2001 – which were adopted (in amended form) in 2002.

2 While there are many parallels between higher education and other areas of public policy in Australia – not least, the other sectors of education policy – tracing such parallels is beyond the scope of this article.

3 Absent the University of New South Wales and the Australian National University – where, in both cases, strike action was made redundant by industrial agreements that thwarted the contested industrial relations components of BAF.

4 The AVCC committed itself publicly to a heavy endorsement of the SuperHECS approach (initially developed by Miller and Pincus, and published in their 1997 article, 'SuperHECS') adopted in the *BAF* package, and a somewhat muted endorsement of increased domestic undergraduate full fees (DUFF) places. When the ALP, the Australian Democrats, the Greens, and most independent senators indicated their opposition to that approach, the AVCC launched a campaign to change their views. Many sources noted the lengths to which John Mullarvey and Deryck Schreuder went in persuading the independent senators to pass an amended version of the Government's package (most extraordinary being the decision not to insist on indexation of university grants). Meanwhile, in conducting its campaign, the AVCC leadership became estranged from most portfolio-relevant parliamentarians and their staff outside the Coalition parties. Thus the September 2003 AVCC response to *Aim Higher*

(Schreuder's *Fairness and Flexibility*) was in part an attempt to resume constructive relations with the federal opposition while maintaining the AVCC's endorsement of SuperHECS and increased DUFF places. Anecdotal evidence suggests the rapprochement will not be achieved easily.

5 Norton, *The Unchained University*, CIS Policy Monograph 56, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 2002.

6 Most recently, Science and Innovation Mapping Taskforce, *Mapping Australia's Science and Innovation*, AGPS, Canberra, 2003, available at: <http://www.dest.gov.au/mapping/> (accessed 16/1/2004). See also Dorothy Illing, 'Science staff on the slide,' *The Australian* 22 October 2003, 29.

7 For a more detailed reckoning of a similar judgement, see Michael Gallagher, 'The evolution of higher education financing in Australia,' paper presented at the German-Australian Conference on Higher Education Financing, Berlin, 24 October 2003. He writes, *inter alia*, that 'the proposed policy framework appears only to have coherence when seen as a transitional shift towards a more radical agenda,' p. 34.

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